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A national strategy to promote Open Educational Practices in higher education in Australia

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Currently in Australia, there are no policies and regulations at national levels to promote and encourage the adoption of Open Educational Practices (OEP) across the higher education sector. As an attempt to bridge this policy gap, a project proposal was developed by a group of OEP advocates and researchers and then successfully funded by the Australian Government Department of Education and Training (AGDET). This paper explores and discusses the approaches, deliverables and recommendations of this project titled *Students, Universities and Open Education* (OpenEdOz) Project. One of its main deliverables was a National Policy Roadmap, which aimed to assist the government to realise the potential of OEP for the Australian higher education sector and open up opportunities for further national policy development and support in which OEP can flourish. The policy roadmap was informed by a range of national and international evidenced-based case studies related to OEP projects and initiatives.

Keywords: Open Educational Practices, Open Educational Resources, OEP in Australia, OER in Australia, policy for OEP, OEP road map.

Australian context and the rationale of the project

Open Educational Resources (OER) and more recently, Open Educational Practices (OEP) represent an emergent movement that is re-shaping learning and teaching in higher education worldwide. There are several reasons why OER and OEP have been attracting attention from educational institutions, governments, learners and educators around the world. The growth of the open educational trend “is a response to the rising costs of education, the desire for accessing learning in areas where such access is difficult, and an expression of student choice about when and how to learn” (Johnson, Levine, Smith, & Stone, 2010, p. 6). In addition, these learning technologies have the potential to meet the growing demand for higher education worldwide, to provide economy of scale, to increase collaboration between educational institutions, educators and students, to improve learning and teaching through innovation, re-use, remix and translation of open content, to close the gap between formal, non-formal and informal education, amongst other opportunities (Bossu, Brown, & Bull, 2014; Kanwar, Kodhandaraman, & Umar, 2010).

Since being first coined by UNESCO in 2002, the term “Open Educational Resources” has been re-defined several times to meet the fast evolving pace of the movement and to fit into the diverse range of contexts where it has been applied. OER “are educational materials which are licensed in ways that provide permissions for individuals and institutions to reuse, adapt and modify the materials for their own use. OERs can, and do include full courses, textbooks, streaming videos, exams, software, and any other materials or techniques supporting learning” (OER Foundation, 2011). As for OEP, they “are defined as practices which support the (re)use and production of OER through institutional policies, promote innovative pedagogical models, and respect and empower learners as co-producers on their lifelong learning path. OEP address the whole OER governance community: policy makers, managers/ administrators of organisations, educational professionals and learners” (Open Education Quality Initiative, 2011, p. 12).

Currently, many educational institutions, government and funding agencies around the globe have encouraged OEP related initiatives. Many learners have benefited from learning through OER materials, and many educational institutions, including distance education providers, have obtained significant rewards in terms of enhancing their reputations, increasing student enrolment and developing innovative ways to enhance learning at a distance (Wiley & Gurrell, 2009). In Australia, OEP initiatives and programs at higher education levels are still limited compared with other developed countries such as the US, UK and some other European countries (Bossu et al., 2014). However, there are some important developments taking place. For example, at institutional levels, most Australian universities have an open access repository where thesis, research data and outputs from government funded projects and initiatives are made available, typically using open licenses, including Creative Commons licenses, for other researchers to use and re-use (Picasso & Phelan, 2014). At government levels, the existing initiatives have been focused on the government's commitment to transparency, sharing of information, and open access to publicly funded research data and outputs. In addition, major research funding bodies have also responded positively to the government position on open access and have supported open practices through their own regulations (Picasso & Phelan, 2014). These funding bodies, particularly the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching (OLT), have directly funded projects to promote the adoption of OEP in Australian higher education. These are positive developments of course, but they are not directly focused on opening up education through openly licensed educational resources and practices. In fact, at the time of writing, Australia does not have a specific framework, policy or regulation at national level to encourage the higher education sector to embrace OER and OEP (Bossu, 2016; Bossu et al., 2014).

As an attempt to bridge this policy gap, a project proposal was developed by a group of OEP advocates and researchers and then successfully funded by the Australian Government Department of Education and Training (AGDET) (previous Office for Learning and Teaching). This paper explores and discusses the approaches, deliverables and recommendations of this project titled *Students, Universities and Open Education* (OpenEdOz) (Wills, Alexander, & Sadler, 2016). One of its main deliverables was a National Policy Roadmap, which aimed to assist the government to realise the potential of OEP for the Australian higher education sector and open up opportunities for further national policy development and support in which OEP can flourish. The policy roadmap was informed by a range of national and international evidenced-based case studies related to OEP projects and initiatives.

OpenEdOz Project

The OpenEdOz project was initiated in mid-2014 (with the final report submitted in February 2016), and involved three important partner institutions; each of which provided key expertise needed for the successful completion of the project. The partner universities were: Charles Sturt University (lead), the University of Technology Sydney, and the University of Tasmania. The project team, composed of five members from the universities above, were guided by the project's reference group and the evaluator, who were OEP experts recognised nationally and internationally (for more information about the project team, please visit the website at <http://openedoz.org/>).

The project had the following aims:

- Focus on the missing voice of students in understanding emerging technology-based open educational practices (OEP)
- Determine how student learning outcomes can be enhanced with open education practices
- Develop case studies that capture university practice and
- Develop a National Roadmap for an Australian Open Education Strategy, fostering relevant uptake of open educational resources (OER) and open courses (Wills et al., 2016)

Project approach

The project partners worked with their students and staff to develop case studies of open, online education including the contribution of our students to co-created curriculum design. Short case studies were the main source of data in this study, supported by the body of knowledge in OEP. Case studies provide rich, in-depth information collected by case reporters who highlight aspects of the case that she or he thinks best describes those particular circumstances (Yin, 2009). While they accurately describe the particular, it is less clear whether the reported circumstances would apply in different situations. One technique used to reduce the particularities of the case studies was for each case to investigate a different example of open practice to then present a collective picture of OEP.

In order to provide guidance regarding the amount of information, and the type of data required in each short case study, a template was developed and tested by the project team. Case studies from international reference group members and international events attended by project team members supplemented the cases documented by the partner institutions. A total of 22 case studies were collected. The case studies can be accessed directly from the project website <http://openedoz.org/case-study-themes-2/>.

OEP recommendations and strategies for national action emerged from the analysis of these case studies and workshopped at national and international events. These events included:

- International Think Tank – Sydney, Nov 2014;
- Universities Australia Satellite Event – Canberra, Mar 2015;
- National DVCA briefing – Sydney, Oct 2015;
- Education without Borders conference – Albury, Nov 2015.

This strategy enabled the results of this analysis to be considered by key stakeholders within the higher education sector to ensure that the recommendations provided by this project were truly beneficial to the advancement of OEP in Australia. Feedback and suggestions provided by these stakeholders on the case study analysis during these events were collected and then incorporated into the roadmap where appropriate. Below, we discuss the analysis of the short case studies in detail.

Case Study Analysis

In order to better target the types of case studies that would be of benefit to the project, a Theme Matrix was developed and continuously modified as case studies were developed (<http://openedoz.org/case-study-themes-2/>). The initial themes were derived from international literature and projects on OER policy including 2012 Paris OER Declaration (2012), Commonwealth of Learning (2015), Policies for OER Uptake project (POERUP, 2014), and Open Education Quality Initiative (2011). The top 10 OEP themes that emerged from this analysis were: Student Voice, Institutional Strategy, National Policy, Student Co-creation, Course offered as OER, Degree design based on OER, Module based on OER, Credit Transfer, Accreditation of informal & non-formal learning, and Open Licensing.

A network analysis of the individual case studies was undertaken to discover which components were related to each other and the strength of the association that existed between those elements. This analysis was used to devise a systemic view of who and what influenced open education practices and reveal the patterns within those interactions (McCabe, 2007). It was expected that a visual representation of these patterns would open up alternative interpretations of the complexity and dynamic nature of the interactions than those offered by an in-depth analysis of any particular element alone (see Figure 1). The network analysis looked at whether any relationships identified by the case reporters existed across the case studies. The focus was on the relationships between elements rather than on the individual elements themselves. The relational data that formed the network came from incidental descriptions of connections mentioned in the case studies. These elements were classified and entered into a frequency table with one representing a relationship and zero for no relationship. The resulting matrix formed the basis for the graphic representation of a set of objects connected by links that describes some kind of relationship. The size of the object in the network represented the frequency in which it was mentioned as the object of a relationship (ranging from once for graduates to 22 times for staff). The number of times a relationship was mentioned determined the thickness of the line that linked two objects. All the links between elements were put together to form a network with the closeness of objects defined as the shortest path connecting one element to another (ranging from 2 connections for graduates to 29 connections for staff). Relationships were labelled with the descriptor chosen by the case reporter and a case identifier, with ‘awareness’ the most commonly used descriptor across the network.

During this analysis, two main clusters and another minor cluster emerged. The strongest cluster of associations was the relationship between the words staff, institutions and students. The strongest bonds that build these relationships came through awareness and sharing. A second set of associations was between institutions, staff, textbooks and resources with the relationships structured around finding OER. The third set of associations was a triad between resources, students and National Policy where the significant issue was about cost.

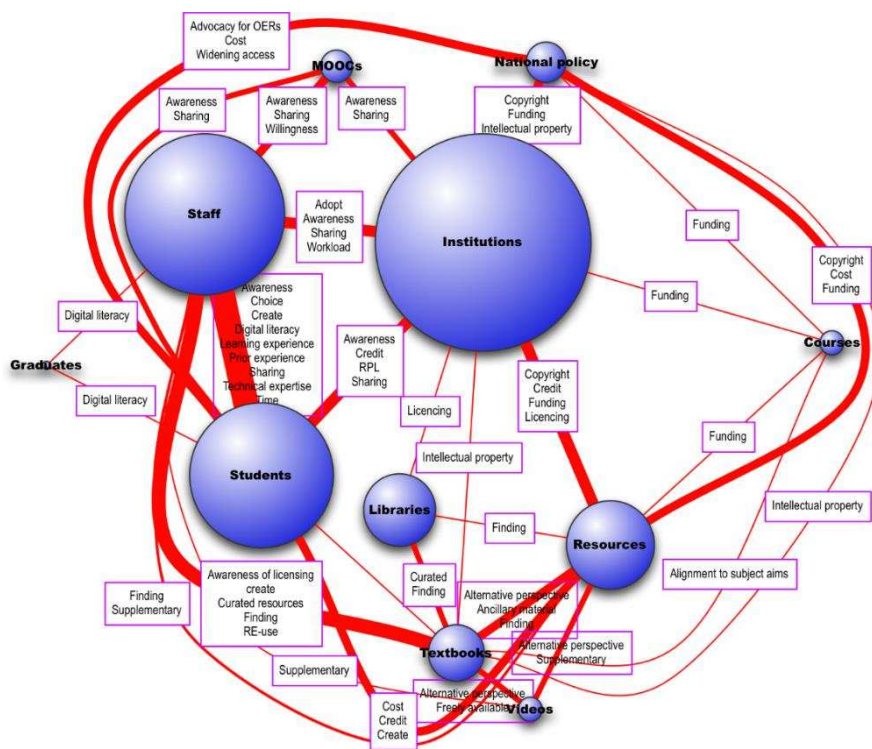


Figure 1: Network analysis of the project case studies

Recommendations for national action

The OpenEdOz project derived three key recommendations for national action from the case study analysis and the feedback from key stakeholders:

1. Agree on a national strategy to leverage contemporary information technology for improving productivity of higher education through use of Open Educational Resources
2. Fund a national body to drive the strategy development
3. Engage relevant national organisations in implementation of elements of the strategy as per the OpenEdOz National Roadmap (Wills et al., 2016)

A number of suggested individual strategies that could contribute to national action are also provided in the Roadmap to a National Strategy (please see Table 1). The Roadmap outlines 10 signposts and 25 contributing strategies which point the way for what a national strategy could look like as well as highlight relevant national organisations that can facilitate action.

Table 1: Roadmap to a National Strategy

Signpost	Contributing Strategies	National Organisations
Advocacy	1. Organise Australian summits, conferences, workshops and develop/collect resources to raise awareness of the importance of open education at the intersection of university business models and university knowledge transfer/social justice commitments	UA, AGDET, ACODE, CAUL, CADAD, CAUDIT, ODLAA, ASCILITE
Students	2. Define new Open Education Literacies as part of Digital Literacies and Information Literacies 3. Research and evaluate student real use and understanding of open resources and open courses in particular their expertise in creation and their understanding of academic integrity in acknowledgment of open sources	UA DVCAs, AGDET, AGDET, NUS
Teachers	4. Review foundation teaching courses for university teachers to facilitate understanding of open educational practice and model best practice by using open content in the courses	AGDET, UA DVCAs, CADAD

	<p>5. Weight awards and grants towards teachers' adaptation and use of OER (versus development of new OERs)</p> <p>6. Encourage and reward the diversity of academic teaching-related roles that flow from potential disaggregation of university services e.g. assessment and RPL expertise</p> <p>7. Foster community of practice for open resources developers and build their understanding of Open Design</p>	<p>AGDET, CADAD</p> <p>UA, DVCAs</p> <p>ACODE, ASCILITE</p>
Standards	8. Review institutional strategic plans, course policies and RPL policies in light of impact of open content and student-driven degrees on degree pathways, course coherence, evidence of meeting standards	UA, TEQSA
Intellectual Property, Licensing & Copyright	<p>9. Review and report intellectual property policies in education and widely disseminate understanding of the reform</p> <p>10. Facilitate wider use of Creative Commons licensing – refer universities & academics to forthcoming Toolkit</p> <p>11. Promote and prepare for libraries role in curating both open and closed resources, in particular student-created open resources</p> <p>12. Promote development and adoption of open textbooks</p> <p>13. Establish national support for peer review of open educational content</p>	<p>Aust Digital Alliance, National Copyright Council, Creative Commons Australia, AUSGOAL</p> <p>UA, ACODE, CADAD, NCU</p> <p>ASCILITE, CAUL</p> <p>ACODE, CAUL</p> <p>AGDET, ASCILITE</p>
ICT Infrastructure	<p>14. Accelerate roll-out of broadband access to regional areas in order that no learner is disadvantaged in open use of high quality digital resources by university courses</p> <p>15. Provide access to a free open platform for delivering open courses</p> <p>16. Underpin portfolio degrees and student mobility by confirming national collaboration on Digital Student Data Project as per Groningen Declaration</p>	<p>NBNCo, CAUDIT, AARNet</p> <p>OUA</p> <p>UA DVC Corp</p>
Research	17. Facilitate on-going educational research and benchmarking on open education and open design in conjunction with international projects	AGDET, ACODE, ASCILITE
Discoverability	<p>18. Build on Australia's progress with Open Access for research outputs by adding mechanisms, metadata and rewards for sharing educational resources</p> <p>19. Create "open" librarian roles and "open" educational developer roles for working with academics to discover, evaluate and adapt OERs</p> <p>20. Build on past experience nationally and internationally that discoverability is best enhanced via discipline-based approaches</p>	<p>AGDET, CAUL, ACODE, AUSGOAL</p> <p>CAUL, ACODE</p> <p>Australian Councils of Deans</p>
Collaboration	<p>21. Foster national and international partnerships for open education and revisit potential broader role for Open Universities Australia</p> <p>22. Support collaboration across professional groups e.g. librarians, educational technologists, academic developers</p> <p>23. Foster OEP as a platform for Regional Development</p> <p>24. Establish productive partnerships with museums and galleries in curating content for openness</p>	<p>UA, OUA, AGDET</p> <p>CAUL, CAUDIT, ACODE, CADAD</p> <p>UA DVC Corp</p> <p>Council</p> <p>Australasian Museum Directors, ABC, SBS, NBNCo</p>
Sustainability	25. Promote OERs as supportive of universities' sustainability goals including efficiencies in production of digital learning resources	UA, AGDET, CAUL

Please find a list of abbreviations of the above national organisations at <http://openedoz.org/resources/>

Conclusion

This paper presented and discussed key elements of an AGDET funded project titled *Students, Universities and Open Education (OpenEdOz) Project*. One of the project's main deliverables was a National Policy Roadmap that is intended to directly support the Australian federal government to take advantage of the full potential of OEP for the Australian higher education sector. The Roadmap to an OEP National Strategy was informed by a series of short case studies that explored national and international OEP projects and initiatives. The project team hope that this Roadmap will further inform national level decision makers of the issues to consider while engaging with OEP. We also hope this roadmap will encourage the development of OEP focused policies and regulations at national levels, so that the Australian higher education sector will be able to fully take advantage of the already globally recognised opportunities of OEP. In addition, national education bodies including ASCILITE need to be fully engaged as the drivers of Australia's OEP Strategy for universities. We invite them to place OEP firmly on their agenda but to do so with a practical and deep understanding of what constitutes "open".

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